

The beauty of wind farms

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OFF the coast of British Columbia in Canada is an island called Quadra, where I have a cabin that is as close to my heart as you can imagine. From my porch on a good day you can see clear across the waters of Georgia Strait to the snowy peaks of the rugged Coast Mountains. It is one of the most beautiful views I have seen. And I would gladly share it with a wind farm.

But sometimes it seems like I'm in the minority. All across Europe and North America, environmentalists are locking horns with the wind industry over the location of wind farms. In Alberta, one group is opposing a planned wind farm near Cypress Hills Provincial Park, claiming it would destroy views of the park and disturb some of the last remaining native prairie in the province. In the UK more than 100 national and local groups, led by some of the country's most prominent environmentalists, have argued that wind power is inefficient, destroys the ambience of the countryside and makes little difference to carbon emissions. And in the US, the Cape Wind Project, which would site 130 wind turbines off the coast of affluent Cape Cod, Massachusetts, has come under fire from famous liberals, including Senator Edward Kennedy and Walter Cronkite.

It is time for some perspective. With the growing urgency of climate change, we cannot have it both ways. We cannot shout from the rooftops about the dangers of global warming and then turn around and shout even louder about the "dangers" of windmills. Climate change is one of the greatest challenges humanity will face this century. It cannot be solved through good intentions. It will take a radical change in the way we produce and consume energy - another industrial revolution, this time for clean energy, conservation and efficiency.

We have undergone such transformations before and we can do it again. But first we must accept that all forms of energy have associated costs. Fossil fuels are limited in quantity and create vast amounts of pollution. Large-scale hydroelectric power floods valleys and destroys animal habitat. Nuclear power is terribly expensive and creates radioactive waste.

Wind power also has its downsides. It is highly visible and can kill birds. The fact is, though, that any man-made structure can kill birds - houses, radio towers, skyscrapers. In Toronto alone, it is estimated that 10,000 birds collide with the city's tallest buildings every year. Compared with this, the risk to birds from well-sited wind farms is very low.

Even at Altamont Pass in California, where 7000 turbines were erected on a migratory route, only 0.2 birds per turbine per year have been killed. Indeed, the real risk to birds comes not from windmills but from a changing climate, which threatens the very existence of bird species and their habitats. This is not to say that wind farms should be allowed to spring up anywhere. They should always be subject to environmental impact assessments. But a blanket "not in my backyard" approach is hypocritical and counterproductive.

Pursuing wind power as part of our move towards clean energy makes sense. It is the fastest-growing source of energy in the world - a \$6 billion industry last year. Its cost has dropped dramatically over the past two decades because of larger turbines and greater knowledge of how to build, install and operate turbines more effectively. Prices will likely decrease further as the technology improves.

Are windmills ugly? I remember when Mostafa Tolba, executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme from 1976 to 1992, told me how when he was growing up in Egypt, smokestacks belching out smoke were considered signs of progress. Even as an adult concerned about pollution, it took him a long time to get over the instinctive pride he felt when he saw a tower pouring out clouds of smoke.

We see beauty through filters shaped by our values and beliefs. Some people think wind turbines are ugly. I think smokestacks, smog, acid rain, coal-fired power plants and climate change are ugly. I think windmills are beautiful. They harness the power of the wind to supply us with heat and light. They provide local jobs. They help clean our air and reduce climate change.

And if one day I look out from my cabin's porch and see a row of windmills spinning in the distance, I won't curse them. I will praise them. It will mean we are finally getting somewhere.